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ROBINSON JEFFERS

A Portrait

Robinson Jeffers

A Portrait

By

Louis Adamic

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I.

MEETING him for the first time, one is not readily at ease because evidently he is uncomfortable himself. This seems to be true of nearly everyone I know who has met him. He glances at one reticently, shrinking with a sort of alarm. He looks about as though seeking a way of escape or of getting rid of the intruder. His manner is intense with restraint, which one is apt to mistake for nervousness. His hand-grip is reluctant and, while firm, lacking in friendly warmth. He is like Lawrence of Arabia in his dislike of being touched, and never shakes hands voluntarily with anyone.

His mesmeric eyes, which are the color of the Pacific along the Monterey shore on a sunless day, meet your own, but just for an instant at a time;

then he lowers the sensitive eyelids as though resenting your natural curiosity to know the thoughts and feelings that glow beyond them, or perhaps fearing to fascinate you too much with their metallic strangeness, of which he must be aware. One eye seems slightly out of focus, at times even different in color, and you wonder if the singular gaze of the two eyes is the result of a physical deformity or the manifestation of some mental or emotional condition of his inmost being. Sitting silently in a company of people in his house, while the charming Una Jeffers entertains them, he keeps his eyes lowered most of the time; and even when he talks with one, part of him appears to be "away" some place.

He smiles, but the quality of his smile, too, is illusive. You wonder: does he smile because that is the thing to do? Before his wife takes charge of the visitors, he is painfully ill at ease and gives the impression that he is unsociable. He is that; but one of his best friends assures me that at the bottom of his unsociability is his extremely self-conscious sensitiveness and shyness which verge upon morbidity. To those who during the summer months pass through his gate he is polite and

seems even to want to be nice to them after they are settled down in his living-room and Una is conducting the conversation, but evidently he is determined that none will affect him aside from wasting his time. He has written: "I am quits with the people."

He is uninterested in what anyone thinks of him, his verse, or anything else. He almost never talks of his work. "If I bring it into light," he explains, "it leaves me." He accepts no invitations and extends few. He never goes out of his way to meet anyone. One of his best friends, Dr. Lyman Stookey—of whom more anon—he has seen but once in seventeen years, and of his other friends he would think just as much if they came near him only once in a decade. Yet there is no trace of malice or spite in him. He just doesn't care for such things.

He never speaks ill of people or imputes mean motives. Indeed, he hardly ever speaks of anyone. A number of very fine people I know consider him the most completely and consistently courteous person within their ken. He never argues with anyone about anything if he can avoid it. He is extremely reserved. Usually his atten-

tion in conversation disarms the visitors' pique at his silence. Notwithstanding the things he has written about the "apes that walk like herons" and "brainfuls of perplexed passions," he appears to have a strong feeling for essential human dignity and never violates his own or others'. He writes few letters and reads fewer criticisms of his poetry.

His voice comes in low, restrained tones which for a time make it hard to understand him. He uses the fewest words possible. Most questions and remarks he answers in monosyllables, some wordlessly with a barely perceptible shrug or a "Mona Lisa smile," which you are free to interpret as you like.

Every phase of his personality seems to be under powerful, apparently conscious and voluntary, control. Before you are with him long, you know that he is an extraordinary character. His face is thin, a poet's face, profound, not quite of this age and place, mediaeval, with strength written all over it: pale-brown, weather-beaten, masculine, clean shaven, with a straight slim nose and sensitive nostrils, a well-formed mouth with lips of moderate thickness, a firm chin, a high smooth

forehead rising from straight eyebrows, and medium-sized, handsome ears. His hair is brown, beginning to gray at the temples. There appears to be just a suggestion of asymmetry. All his senses obviously are very acute.

The occasional smile enlivens the face but little: which is also true of his gaze. Somehow, both the smile and the eyes seem to insist with their singularity that the observer consider them by themselves, apart from the face; it is they that do most to make his outward personality enigmatic, fascinating.

His physique harmonizes with the cut of the face. The slender body is above medium height, hard, sinewy, agile. My first glimpse of him was as he vaulted a fence just as I entered the young forest of cypress-trees and eucalypti he is planting on his estate. As I saw later, he had turned on the hydrant to water the seedlings and was making a dash around the building to beat the current to the nozzle of the hose on the other end of the grounds. The leap, performed with grace and a minimum of movement, testified to the fine control he has over his body. He is forty-two years of age. He is a good swimmer, summer and winter, and hikes

considerably along the Monterey coast and in the hills in back of Point Lobos. He likes to toss ball, wrestle, jump, and race with his two young sons. He has no taste for competitive sport and abhors killing animals and birds.

He wears shirts open at the throat, army breeches and leggings; in cool weather, a leather jerkin over the shirt. He disdains fine raiment and luxurious motors. He eats sparingly, and only the simplest food. A man of the out-of-doors, an athlete. His excellent physical condition may be partly due to his low pulse—forty in the morning, sixty in the afternoon. There is a cool aura about his person, which, however, does not cause shivers; rather, it endows him with a dignity I have never seen in anyone else.

II

The work of a poet, like the work of any other man, is largely conditioned by the circumstances of his life. George Jean Nathan said that "if Walt Whitman had owned an extra pair of pants he would have been a royalist." Possibly so; at any rate, it is safe to say that Whitman could not have

written *Leaves of Grass* had he not come of workman parentage, had he not at an early age had to shift for himself, and had he not had that American world of seemingly boundless possibilities to do it in. Moreover, Whitman was ignorant of science, of philosophy, and of the fine arts. "A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books"—and therein lay both his great strength and his weakness as a poet and an artist.

Robinson Jeffers, on the other hand, was born into the home of a well-known Christian divine, William Hamilton Jeffers, LL.D., of Pittsburgh, who was also a scholar in languages, especially Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic, with a comfortable fortune and frequent opportunities of travel. The future poet was reared on the marrow of the classics and spent most of his boyhood and early manhood travelling with his father, who was also his teacher, over Europe and the Near East. Abroad, he also studied at the University of Zürich; in the United States, at the University of Western Pennsylvania, the University of Southern California, Occident College in Los Angeles, and the University of Washington in Seattle. He

reads and speaks well French and German and reads fluently Latin and Greek. He has delved into Western and Oriental systems of thought; and in the realm of science, on one hand, he has dipped into psychology, biology and bacteriology, and, on the other, reached into astronomical immensities.

In Jeffers' early life some incidents are of interest. At the age of eight, on his father's country estate, "Twin Hollows," in Pennsylvania, the boy experienced the triumph of teaching himself to swim, no mean accomplishment for one so young. His father was somewhat of a moralist and disciplinarian, and between the ages of eight and eleven young John (the poet's original given name) expended most of his best energy in vain rebellions against compulsory studiousness under parental authority. He was allowed only an occasional ramble in the country. At the age of twelve he found himself in a Swiss boarding-school, where he had relative freedom, lakes to swim in, and mountains to climb, preferably alone. His teachers called him "the little Spartan."

At fourteen he came upon a paper-covered copy of Rossetti's poems which he read and re-read till

the book was worn out. He developed a vigorously self-conscious interest in poetry. A while later he read Swinburne. The Bible was his steady diet throughout boyhood. At fifteen an English old maid in Zürich lent him *Also Sprach Zarathustra.* Years later, in Los Angeles, a fellow-student, Una Call, who later became his wife, gave him Arthur Symons' essay, "Wordsworth and Shelley" to read. Plutarch's *Lives* he read through several times while yet in his teens. In his twenties he studied Freud and Jung, but mostly at second hand. While in the medical school he was deeply interested in bacteriology.

The general ideas that have played vital rôles in his thought processes are the theory of evolution which he got from his father in childhood; the mechanistic, anti-spiritual point of view which, during the three years in the medical school, intruded itself with great force upon his innate mysticism; and, finally, fatalism (perhaps a heritage from his Calvinist and Celtic ancestry) reinforced by scientific determinism.

His father (now dead), his wife, and his twin sons are the only people who have deeply entered into his intimate life as purely human influences.

Dr. Lyman Stookey, formerly a professor of bacteriology at the University of Southern California, now a practicing pathologist in Los Angeles, is perhaps his closest personal friend. "Jeff," as the doctor calls him, was his best student and, as such, lived in his house for nearly two years. Dr. Stookey tells me that it took him a year to overcome Jeffers' shyness so that he would talk with him freely, and that then it was sheer joy to sit with him in a room, smoking and talking. "Jeff is hyper-sensitive and shy, rather than unsociable," insists Dr. Stookey. "And he is the most thoroughly fine man I know." Besides bacteriology, Dr. Stookey taught him wrestling, and one year Jeff won the heavyweight wrestling championship of the University.

Jeffers' fellow-students considered him rather odd. He had little to say and seemed absorbed in himself. Now and then he would drift along with them, drink, sow wild oats, kill time, but never for long. He was fond of swimming and going on solitary trips, afoot or on horseback, into Southern California mountains.

In his mid-twenties he came into a small legacy which, considering his modest wants, made him

economically free. Some time later he married one of the most beautiful, brilliant, and generally adored women on the Coast, who was eagerly and intelligently interested in the development of his talents.

III

To write of Robinson Jeffers the man and the artist with any pretension to thoroughness without writing also of Una Jeffers is impossible. I have no doubt that some day she will be an important factor in all serious considerations of her poet-husband's life and work; at this time, one must be content to deal with her very briefly.

Swinburne remarked about William Blake's wife that she "deserves remembrance as about the most perfect wife on record"; and it seems to me that something to the same effect could be said of Una Jeffers, though, of course, Catherine Blake, who was an uneducated peasant woman, and the lady at Carmel-by-the-Sea can—in relation to their husbands as poets and artists—hardly be compared on any particular point.

Robin, as Una Jeffers calls him, says himself:

" 'She gave me eyes, she gave me ears' "—quoting a line from Wordsworth's poem about his sister Dorothy—"and arranged my life."

Jeffers has in his make-up certain traits which, lacking Una, might have kept him from attaining to the place in American poetry that he now occupies. For one thing, he is given to the *laissez faire* policy. He is disinclined to try to change things; indeed, people who have known him best in his student years and later tell me that he used to be entirely a fatalist and an introvert. Occupied with his thoughts, and being, besides, economically independent, he felt little inclined to bother about publishing for other people's reading. Una Jeffers, on the other hand, possesses great driving force and the energy of concentrated effort.

Before his marriage, Jeffers had never done a moment's labor with his hands. Subsequently, under Una's subtle urging, his most satisfying hours were spent doing stone work and digging on his five acres, planting trees and tending them. The famous Hawk Tower was largely her idea; and for five years he spent hours every day rolling or carrying granite boulders up from the beach two or three hundred yards away, mixing mortar,

erecting one of the strangest buildings in America. It is built to last. The walls at the base are nearly six feet in width, thick enough to hide, on one side, a narrow stairway that winds up to the upper stories. In Carmel, Jeffers is famous chiefly for the five years he has wasted building a tower that a contractor could have put up in two weeks. People used to stop along the sea road that winds past the place, to watch the seemingly harmless lunatic manipulate rocks with his primitive pulley, such as the old Egyptians are said to have used. Some one made up a story of the feeling of timelessness around Jeffers' tower-building. It seems that one day at sunset a traveller came along and paused to watch Robin at his work. The next day he went to China and lived there for three years. Returning to Carmel late in the fourth year, the man again went walking on the shore road one day at sunset-time and, coming to Jeffers' place, he saw Robin in precisely the same attitude rolling up stones from the beach.

The building of the tower, although originally Una's idea, is characteristic of Jeffers. He is one of the serenest, most deliberate and self-sufficient persons alive. He is bored only if molested too much by people.

As a poet and artist, he unquestionably ha grown greatly since settling down in Carmel i 1914. One can scarcely believe that the John Robinson Jeffers who in 1913 published a third-rate story in the *Smart Set* has become crystalized into the Robinson Jeffers who wrote *Tamar, Roan Stallion, The Women of Point Sur,* and *Cawdor.* The coast and hills of the Monterey County no doubt have contributed generously to his development. He has become a part of the place, and the place of him, so that now it would be difficult to imagine him anywhere else. It is one of the most weirdly beautiful regions in America, and Jeffers and his tower fit into it perfectly.

His days are arranged for him so that he spends until one in the afternoon in his study or in the turret of the tower at his writing. He likes best to have a routine of carefully planned tasks so that the little things need not be thought over. Of late years, he devotes most of his afternoons to the two thousand young trees he has planted. Watching him work in the grove, one thinks of Giles Winterborne in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders:*

> . . . He had a marvelous power of making trees grow . . . a sort of sympathy between him and them . . . so that the

roots took hold of the soil in a few days. Winterborne's fingers were endowed with a gentle conjuror's touch in spreading the roots of each little tree, resulting in a sort of caress under which the delicate fibres all laid themselves out in their proper directions for growth. He put most of these roots toward the southwest: for he said in forty years' time, when some great gale is blowing from that quarter, the trees will require the strongest holdfast on that side to stand against it and not fall. . . .

Evenings he reads to his family. Between him and his twelve-year-old sons exists an extraordinarily close relationship. He has an infinite patience and will explain and re-explain matters to them, and they are mutually utterly devoted. In the last two years he has read to them all of W. H. Hudson, ten Waverly novels, ten Hardy, three Dostoievski, besides many travel books and other volumes, such as Lawrence's *Revolt in the Desert*, Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*, and even Cellini's autobiography. He reads verse exquisitely, in a sort of monotone, with due weight given to accent and rhythms.

Once in a fortnight or so he takes his family for a long tramp back in the Monterey hills and redwood canyons. He is fond of examining stones and geological formations closely; also trees and

plants, water courses, animals and their tracks, a old abandoned human habitations and enterpris which, in that peculiar region, one is apt t encounter at every turn. He is saturating himsel with the Indian and old Spanish lore of the country. He goes practically never beyond the limits of Monterey County. If he appears in the business section of Carmel, it is an event. He dislikes to have people eye and follow him. Occasionally he goes to the Lick Observatory where his brother is engaged in astronomical work, in which he is much interested. In fifteen years he went to San Francisco once, in 1917, to be examined for military service.

Since his marriage, he has developed a profound interest in natural objects and scenery, in which Una Jeffers revels. No doubt, she has influenced him in that direction. Also, she has an acute instinct for seizing dramatic moments of human clashes and reactions, from which he as a writer profits considerably. She is to him simultaneously wife, mother, and manager of his talents. She not only gave him eyes and ears and arranged his life, but, to go much deeper into the problem of his personality, she has—consciously or unconsciously

—counteracted his intense introversion (of which more anon) and saved him from its fatal consequences to him as an artist.

IV

Jeffers cares more for form than for color. He loves wet weather, low-hanging skies, and fog rolling up from the sea. Storms—"storm's kind, kind violence"—exhilarate him immensely. In the most inclement weather he often goes to the turret of his tower, to feel and absorb the furies of wind and sea. Both the tower and the family's house are built upon solid granite against which the waves beat, and the rhythm of the ocean ceaselessly reverbrates through them. He distrusts a blazing sun, believes that the beneficial effects of sunshine are overestimated, and points to the hardy races of Northern Europe who live in dark countries. He observes the barometer closely and never goes to bed without going outdoors, about midnight, to walk around the place, that he may mark the rising and setting of constellations, feel the direction of the wind, and notice the tide at ebb or flow.

He says that his inability to kill animals or birds is a matter of self-indulgence, not principle. Life is one of the cheapest and most abundant commodities on earth and in itself far from sacred to him: but he hates to inflict pain (although in his poetry he preaches pain). Una Jeffers tells me that he never picks a flower wantonly, or prunes a tree or roots up a weed if he can avoid it. She believes that life is more honored by him than he realizes. In his everyday life he is perhaps the gentlest person living.

He reads considerably, but never goes far out of his way to obtain a book. He prefers Hardy, George Moore, and Yeats to most other modern writers. Of the Americans, he reads with interest Edgar Lee Masters and Eugene O'Neill. D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and Dostoievski's *Crime and Punishment* he considers two of the finest novels written in recent times. He is on the mailing lists of several scientific journals printed here and abroad. They are his newspapers. He is deeply interested in biology and psychology. He has a distaste for the theatre and a dread of orchestral music, which he calls "noise"; but he enjoys the ancient English and Gaelic ballads

which his wife frequently plays on her little reed organ in the tower.

He follows the more or less extraordinary ventures of civilization here and abroad with an aloof, disinterested eye. An extreme individualist, he has a deep aversion to group projects and thinks that America is mad on the subject of group activity. He watches all movements toward freedom; in general, dislikes laws, restrictions, and bonds for people; but, on the oher hand, does not feel hopeful of any utopias to be secured through new systems. In a letter he wrote: "Some of you think that you can save society. I think it is impossible, and that you [radicals, social uplifters, etc.] only hasten the process of decadence. Of course as a matter of right and justice I sympathize with radicalism; and in any case I don't oppose it; from an abstract point of view there is no reason that I know of for propping and prolonging the period of decadence. Perhaps the more rapid it is, the more rapid comes the new start."

But in spite of his hopelessness, his "terribleness," "tragic terror," and "vast despair," of which much has been written, and in spite of such complaints as may be found in his own writings,

notably in "An Artist," he is a happy man, as happiness goes. In his philosophy, he recognizes that every personal story ends more or less in tragedy; comedy is an unfinished story. The impersonal or universal story never finishes at all and is neither merry nor sad, though to Jeffers it appears intensely in earnest. I am assured that he is quite ridiculously content with his personal environment. He says: "I should be glad to live like this for several centuries: but good and evil are very cunningly balanced in the most favored lives, and I should not consider myself ill-used if I was to die tomorrow, though it would be very annoying." In a letter to his publisher, Horace Liveright, who had asked him for biographical data, he wrote: "According to Laurence Sterne, the only things of consequence that a man can do are to plant a tree, get a child, build a house, write a book. I have just finished a book and have built a house and gotten two children, and planted 2000 trees—but none of these is biographical material."

V

An extraordinary man, this Jeffers: living in a curious place on the western edge of America, with sharp rocks sticking out of the sea all along the shore and twisted trees stretching their arms landward: writing strange verse of excessive intensity and terribleness in terms of a mad philosophy that is the result of his profound personal introversion and great knowledge of facts and theories pertaining to the universe of man. His idea of our civilization's fatal introversion, which is an important although very obscure factor in his poetry, no doubt is an expansion of the self-consciousness of his own mind's introverted condition. His terribleness, perhaps, is but the mirror of the violent effort of his own strong personality to save itself from being self-devoured.

As to the form in Jeffers's poetry, in a note that I have before me he says:

> I want it rhythmic and not rhymed, moulded more closely to the subject than older English poetry is but as formed as alcaics if that were possible too. The event is of course a compromise but I like to avoid arbitrary form and capricious lack or disruption of form. —My feeling is for the number of beats to the line. There is a quantitive element too in

which the unstressed syllables have part. The rhythm comes from many sources—physics, biology, beat of blood, the tidal environments of life, desire for singing emphasis that prose does not have.

Much has been written about the symbolism that underlies Jeffers's forbidden themes. The official explanation of this element in his poetry follows:

In *Tamar* a little and vaguely, in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* and *The Women of Point Sur* consciously and definitely, incest is symbolized racial introversion—man regarding man exclusively—founding his values, desires, his picture of the universe, all on his own humanity. With the thickening of civilization, science reforms the picture of the universe and makes it inhuman but the values and desires are ever more fixed inward. People living in cities hardly look at or think of anything but each other and each other's amusements and works. Barclay in *The Women of Point Sur* was finding and identifying himself and the world (emotionally conceived as God) until seduced by desire of disciples and incestuous love, *i.e.*, by letting himself be turned back on humanity. His tragedy grew from that impurity. For those who want little and have much strength can afford to be impure: but not those who want all and have little strength.

Many critics and most ordinary readers complain of obscurity in his longer poems; others arrive at opposite opinions about them; and a few well-meaning people even tremble for his family

and neighbors, expecting any day to hear that the terrible poet has gone on a rampage of rape and murder. So it may be well to quote at some length from a rather revealing letter that Jeffers wrote to James Rorty, another poet, some time after the appearance of *The Women of Point Sur:*

You were right evidently about the need of an explanation. I have just read ——'s article, and if he, a first rate critic and a poet and a good friend of my work, quite misunderstands the book, it is very likely that no one else will understand it at present.

. . . a couple of letters ago I spoke of the morality—perhaps I said old-fashioned morality—implied in *Point Sur. Tamar* seemed to my later thought to have a tendency to romanticize unmoral freedom, and it was evident a good many people took it that way. That way lies destruction of course, often for the individual but always for the social organism, and one of the later intentions of this *Point Sur* was to indicate the destruction, and strip everything but its natural ugliness from the unmorality. Barclay incited people to "be your desires . . . flame . . . enter freedom." The remnant of his sanity—if that was the image of himself that he met on the hilltop—asks him whether it was for love of mankind that he is "pouring poison into the little vessels." He is forced to admit that if the motive seems love, the act is an act of hatred.

Another intention, this time a primary one, was to show in action the danger of that *Roan Stallion* idea of "breaking out

of humanity," misinterpreted in the mind of a fool or a lunatic. . . . It is not anti-social, because it has nothing to do with society; but just as Ibsen, in *The Wild Duck*, made a warning against his own idea in the hands of a fool, so *Point Sur* was meant to be a warning; but at the same time a reassertion.

. . .

For the rest of the book was meant to be:

(1) An attempt to uncenter the human mind from itself. There is no health for the individual whose attention is taken up with his own mind and processes; equally there is no health for the society that is always introverted on its own members, as ours becomes more and more, the interest engaged inward in love and hatred, companionship and competition. These are necessary of course, but as they absorb all the interest they become fatal. All past cultures have died of introversion at last, and so will this one, but the individual can be free of the net, in his mind. It is a matter of "transvaluing values," to use the phrase of somebody that local people accuse me quite falsely of deriving from.—I have often used incest as a symbol to express these introversions, and used it too often.

(2) The book was meant to be a tragedy, that is an exhibition of essential elements by the burning away through pain and ruin of inertia and the unessential.

(3) A valid study in phychology; the study valid, the psychology morbid, sketching the growth of a whole system of emotional delusions from a "private impurity" that was quite hidden from consciousness until insanity brought it to the surface.

(4) Therefore a partial and fragmentary study of the origin of religions; which have been necessary to society in the past, and I think remain necessary whether we like it or not, yet they derive from a "private impurity" of some kind in their originators.

(5) A satire on human self-importance; referring back to (1).

(6) A judgment of the tendencies of our civilization, which has very evidently turned the corner down hill. "Powers increase and power perishes." Our literature, as I said in answer to the *New Masses* questionaire, is not especially decadent (because in general it is not especially anything); but our civilization has begun to be.

. . .

There were more intentions, but these are the chief ones that can readily be said in prose. Too many intentions. I believe they all carry over to an intelligent reader, as results though not as intentions, but no doubt I was asking him to hold too many things in mind at once. I had concentrated my energies for a long time on perceptions and expression, and forgot that the reader could not concentrate so long, nor so intensely, nor from the same detached and inclusive viewpoint.

"Too many intentions," is right. Perhaps they are so obscure because so many. I doubt if very many people will detect all of them even with the aid of his explanation; and a reader would be justified, from his own viewpoint, to imagine that

the poet discovered the intentions after completing the book.

After writing the letter to Rorty, Jeffers remarked that the explanations were "very unsatisfactory after all; the book must stand by itself for much more than this rationalization." Doubtless it does. Chesterton says somewhere: "Great poets are obscure for two opposite reasons: now because they are talking about something too large for anyone to understand, and now, again, because they are talking about something too small for anyone to see."

Jeffers has made an impression on America's literary consciousness. In San Francisco, after a friend of mine and I had visited the poet at Carmel, an elderly gentleman prominent in the cultural life of the Coast, congratulated us on our good fortune. "Some day," he said, "your visit with Robinson Jeffers will mean to you what the hour that I as a young man once spent with Walt Whitman in Camden, New Jersey, meant to me."

His poetry impresses, rather than appeals to, one. "I am greatly impressed by its power," said Havelock Ellis of *Roan Stallion.* Too often Jeffers impresses by the exasperation that his

obscurity evokes in one. I read all his verse as soon as it appears and freely admit that the most magnificent passages in American poetry are his—as for example, the part in his last book where Cawdor describes the flight of the caged bird's spirit. I prefer, however, the shorter pieces to the more ambitious poems. "An Artist," for instance, is superb; inspired, as he remarks in the privately printed booklet in which it originally appeared, by some paragraphs about the independence of the artist in Oscar Wilde's essay on *The Soul of Man Under Socialism,* with which he felt "a certain (not more than emotional) sympathy," and written "to carry that independence to its logical conclusion." (Incidentally, ". . . let him alone.")

Jeffers' attitude is that of the artist-aristocrat, withdrawn, aloof, intensely serious, looking down from his tower. The human breed is degenerating (no doubt about it and no way to stop the process) and, viewing it in the mirror of his own mind, his cosmic consciousness, and in relation to the universe, he finds it offensive. America is a "perishing Republic" and will have "centuries of increasing decadence." There is a limited sort of salvation only for the individual. One can crawl

into his cave and stay there. A heron a-wing "over the black ebb" is dearer to him than the "many pieces of humanity . . . gathering shellfish" and dropping "paper and other filth" on his beach, heedless of the sign warning them against it which he has stuck by the road that winds through his place. Indeed, "humanity is needless."

The man comes of pre-Revolutionary stock, but he says that America and civilization are beyond redemption. He warns his young boys to be moderate in their "love of man" and goes on singing of Points Lobos and Sur, of his own hopelessness and violence, of which I spoke; of the elements in their most dramatic moods, of Time and Space. He can hardly be spoken of as an American poet. He is Jeffers, and cannot be discussed in terms of anything or anyone else. It may be said that he stems from the Greeks—Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles—but he goes beyond them in style and form as well as in the dreadfulness of his themes.

Critics—"local people," as he calls them—eager to do justice to Jeffers' significance as a poet, try to establish a kinship between his work and Whitman's. Their eagerness is justified, but wild. Whitman's and Jeffers' statures as poets may

stand comparisons, but aside from their sizes they are as unlike as day and night. Indeed, the emergence of Jeffers, and that he is hailed as a major poet and prophet, is a severe commentary upon Whitman's dream of America.